

Selecting Films for Sex Research: Gender Differences in Erotic Film Preference

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The aim of this study was to explore gender differences in sexual responsiveness to erotic films that had been selected for their differential appeal for men and women. A secondary objective was to identify variables that influence sexual arousal and explore whether these variables differ for men and women. Fifteen men (M age = 26 yrs) and 17 women (M age = 24 yrs) were presented with 20 film clips depicting heterosexual interactions, half of which were female- and the other half male-selected, and were asked to rate the clips on a number of dimensions. Overall, men found the film clips more sexually arousing than did the women. Gender differences in arousal were negligible for female-selected clips but substantial for male-selected clips. Furthermore, men and women experienced higher levels of sexual arousal to clips selected for individuals of their own gender. Cluster regression analyses, explaining 77% of the variance for male and 65% for female participants, revealed that men's sexual arousal was dependent upon the attractiveness of the female actor, feeling interested, and both "imagining oneself as a participant" and "watching as an observer." For women, with all variables entered, only "imagining oneself as a participant" contributed to sexual arousal ratings. The findings suggest that how films are selected in sex research is an important variable in predicting levels of sexual arousal reported by men and women.

KEY WORDS: sexual stimuli; erotic films; sexual arousal; gender differences.

INTRODUCTION

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of erotic films in eliciting sexual arousal and consistently shown that they lead to higher levels of genital and reported sexual arousal in the laboratory than stories, slides, or fantasy instructions (Graham, Janssen, & Sanders, 2000; Heiman, 1980; Julien & Over, 1988; Koukounas & Over, 1997; Laan & Everaerd, 1995a; Smith & Over, 1987). Also, studies in heterosexual men and women have found that explicit sexual stimuli (sexual scenes involving heterosexual intercourse) result in greater arousal than stimuli with

more romantic content (no explicit sexual scenes; emphasis on the relationship and the expression of affection; Heiman, 1977; Schmidt, 1975). For these reasons, along with the advantages of being commercially available and easily duplicated, edited, and standardized, erotic films are widely used in psychophysiological studies on sexual arousal (for reviews, see Cranston-Cuebas & Barlow, 1990; Janssen & Everaerd, 1993; Laan & Everaerd, 1995b), orgasm (e.g., Exton et al., 1999, 2001; Rowland & Slob, 1997), sexual preferences and orientation (e.g., Chivers, Reiger, Latty, & Bailey, in press; Laan, Janssen, & Sonderman, 2002; Sakheim, Barlow, Beck, & Abrahamson, 1985; Steinman, Wincze, Sakheim, Barlow, & Mavissakalian, 1981), and sexual dysfunction (e.g., Berman et al., 2001; Boolell et al., 1996; Janssen, Everaerd, van Lunsen, & Oerlemans, 1994; Meston, 2000; Rowland, Cooper, & Heiman, 1995).

A recurring finding in research using erotic films has been that men and women differ in their responses to such stimuli. In a meta-analytic review of 46 studies comparing responses of men and women to sexual stimuli (including

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films), Murnen and Stockton (1997) concluded that men reported more arousal than women, although the overall effect size was small to moderate ($d = .31$). A number of explanations, reflecting a range of possible social and biological influences, could account for this finding. To begin with, gender differences in self-reported arousal may reflect reporting biases, that is, women may underreport, and men may overreport their subjective arousal. Although this has not been studied in laboratory settings, such response bias is recognized as one important source of measurement error in survey research (Catania, Gibson, Chitwood, & Coates, 1990). Alternatively, because one of the primary themes in erotic films has been dominance of men over women and exploitation of women (Cowan, Lee, Levy, & Snyder, 1988), women may have developed a negative attitude toward sexually explicit films (Stock, 1995). Gender differences could also reflect the influence of biological factors (Baldwin & Baldwin 1997). Evolutionary psychologists have argued that men are biologically "wired," or predisposed to, a greater appreciation of visual sexual stimuli (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994).

Another explanation for why men and women differ in their responses to erotic stimuli has been that most of the available erotica is produced by men for male audiences (Laan, Everaerd, Bellen, & Hanewald, 1994). Consistent with this argument, some studies have found that women do indeed report greater subjective sexual arousal to "women-centered" stimuli compared to erotica targeted to men. Heiman (1977) found that women reported higher levels of sexual arousal to audiotapes that described interactions that were female-initiated (e.g., the female was more active than the male in initiating and performing sexual activities) and female-centered (e.g., description focused on the female's responses, enjoyment, and genitals), as compared to more male-centered and male-initiated stimuli. More recently, Laan et al. (1994) replicated this finding: women reported significantly more sexual arousal during the presentation of a woman-made, female-centered erotic film than in response to a typical mainstream (i.e., man-made, male-centered) film clip. Women also reported more positive and less negative affect to women-centered films, in comparison with films produced for a male audience; however, genital responses to the woman-made and man-made films did not differ. Mosher and MacLan (1994) found that college-aged women reported more arousal to woman-made films than to conventional X-rated films. In addition, women in this study reported experiencing more interest and enjoyment, and less disgust, anger, shame, and distress in response to the woman-made films.

Even in studies that use women-focused erotica, women still tend to report lower levels of sexual arousal

than men. One potentially relevant factor that has not as yet received much attention is the possible influence of the selection process itself. When published articles do provide information about how erotic films are selected (which is seldom the case), they have typically been selected by the researchers. In their meta-analysis, Murnen and Stockton (1997) did not include any variables related to how, or by whom, sexual stimuli were selected (e.g., by a man, a woman, by both, a group of men and women, etc). Yet, this information is relevant as it may partially explain the gender difference in responses to erotic stimuli.

The primary aim of this study was to examine gender differences in sexual responsiveness to erotic films. A secondary objective was to identify variables that influence sexual arousal and explore whether these variables differ for men and women. Laan and Everaerd (1995b) found that the appraisal (i.e., positive or negative evaluation) of erotic stimuli explained more of the variance in subjective sexual arousal than women's level of genital arousal, age, or experience with erotic films. However, apart from how male- or female-centered a sexual stimulus is, other factors that may affect appraisal of sexual stimuli in men and women remain largely unexplored. We examined how characteristics of film clips (e.g., attractiveness of actors, setting, soundtrack), as well as how individuals process sexual stimuli (e.g., identify vs. objectify), might influence appraisal of sexual stimuli.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 15 men (M age = 25.6 years, $SD = 6.10$, range = 20–40) and 17 women (M age = 24.0 years, $SD = 4.14$, range = 19–34) recruited from undergraduate and graduate psychology and sociology classes. Fifteen participants were graduate students and 17 were undergraduates. All 15 male participants and 15 of the female participants reported a heterosexual sexual orientation. One woman described herself as bisexual and another was "undecided." The sample was almost exclusively White (94%). Ten (67%) male and 14 (82%) female participants reported being currently involved in a relationship. With the exception of one man, the participants had all engaged in sexual activity with a partner, and all women and 12 (80%) men had experienced vaginal intercourse. Within the past year, participants reported having engaged in sexual activity (defined as manual stimulation, oral-genital sex, and/or intercourse) and intercourse with a mean of 2.1 ($SD = 1.8$) and 1.6 partners ($SD = 1.7$), respectively. Men and women did not differ significantly in the number

of reported sexual partners. Men, however, reported more frequent masturbation (assessed using a 5-point scale with possible answers ranging from *not once to four times a week or more*; $\chi^2(4) = 4.58, p < .03$), as well as greater consistency of orgasm with masturbation (assessed using a 6-point scale with possible answers ranging from *never to on most/all occasions*; $\chi^2(5) = 8.28, p < .01$).

Film Clips

Selection Method

Five male and six female research assistants working in the psychophysiology laboratory at The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction previewed in total approximately 100 full-length, commercially available adult films to compile a set of candidate clips. All of the research assistants (*M* age for women, 25.3 years, *SD* = 8.21 and *M* age for men, 25.6 years, *SD* = 6.11) had a heterosexual sexual orientation, and all but one were unmarried. The research assistants selected and previewed films individually, and with only two selection criteria: (1) the movies should allow the selection of 3-minute clips that depicted consensual heterosexual petting (kissing, genital, and nongenital touching), oral sex, and intercourse between one man and one woman, and (2) they should not include sadomasochistic or other fetishistic activities, nor the use of sex toys such as dildos and vibrators, and so forth. Apart from these guidelines, the research assistants were simply asked to select film segments that they personally found to be highly sexually arousing. This relatively unstructured protocol was utilized in order to ensure that the selected clips would reflect a range of different personal preferences.

Both male and female previewers used a number of resources in selecting potential videos for screening, including recommendations from catalogues (e.g., *The Good Vibrations' Guide to Adult Videos*), websites (e.g., those maintained by "Adult Video News," "Adam and Eve," and "Videogold"), best seller/rental lists at local video stores, and the Kinsey Institute's film collection. Female previewers searched catalogues and the Internet for recommendations of "women-centered" films. Among these suggestions were the names of several actresses and directors (including Candida Royalle, Toni English, and Kim Wilde), as well as a few film production companies (e.g., *Femme*) with reputations for producing erotica specifically for female audiences. Each previewer selected two to eight 5–10 min film segments from any of the above resources that they found to be highly sexually arousing. This process resulted in 32 sexually explicit film clips, 15 chosen by women and 17 by men.

The female and male teams of research assistants then met separately, on one occasion, to view and rate the arousability of these clips. Clips were viewed in random order. All ratings on the seven-item questionnaire (see *Measures*) were independent and anonymous. Following these sessions, the male- and female-generated unedited film clips were separately rank-ordered using the previewers' ratings. On the basis of the average sexual arousal ratings, the seven clips that the women found most arousing and the seven clips that the men found most arousing were selected for the study. To enable comparison between research assistant-selected clips and clips chosen by researchers, an additional two "male" and two "female" clips that had been recommended by other psychophysiological sex researchers were included (female clips #5 and #7 and male clips #11 and #13, see Fig. 1), as well as one male and one female clip that had been used in the Kinsey Institute's laboratory (clips #6 and #16). The final 20 clips were edited to control for clip length and the types of sexual activities depicted. The editing process involved transforming each raw 5–10 min film segment into a 3-min clip consisting of 1 min of kissing and petting, 1 min of oral sex (preferably both given and received by each partner), and 1 min of vaginal intercourse.

The 20 edited clips⁵ were presented to participants individually in random order; each clip was followed by a 2-min pause to allow for subjective arousal ratings.

Measures

Clip Ratings

The research assistants' evaluations of the 32 unedited film clips were quantified using a seven-item, 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very strongly*). Seven dimensions of the film stimuli were rated: the attractiveness of the male and female actors, as well as how sexually arousing, interesting, repulsive, and male- or female-oriented they found the clips. The rating sheets also provided a space for other comments about the clips, although it was specified that providing such additional information was optional.

The participants' responses to the 20 edited film clips were measured using an expanded version of the clip rating form used by the research assistants. In addition to the first five of the seven items described above, subjects provided ratings on the following eight dimensions: to what extent they imagined themselves as a participant and/or as an observer, how much they identified with the male and/or

⁵The titles of the erotic films from which the clips were taken can be obtained from the first author.

female actors, how much attention they paid to the male and/or female actors, and how much they liked the setting and soundtrack of each clip.

Procedure

Study approval was obtained from the Indiana University Bloomington Campus Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. Participants were paid \$10. After giving informed consent, participants were situated in a private, temperature-controlled testing room furnished with a recliner and a color television monitor. A female experimenter tested the women, while a male experimenter tested the men. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to select erotic film excerpts that would be used in other Kinsey Institute research projects and that their participation would involve viewing such film excerpts. They were assured that all of their responses would be kept strictly confidential and that they would have complete privacy for viewing and evaluating the film stimuli. After giving their informed consent, participants completed the study questionnaire, after which the experimenter left the testing room and operated the videotape equipment from an adjacent chamber. All instructions during the video screenings were delivered over an intercom. Following the presentation of each clip, the experimenter asked the participant to complete a rating form for the video clip just viewed. Once the participant had completed the ratings, s/he used an intercom signal to cue the experimenter to begin the next presentation. This procedure was repeated until all 20 clips, which were presented in random order, had been rated. Following the video screening, the experimenter debriefed and paid the participants.

RESULTS

Clip Ratings

Table I shows the mean ratings as a function of gender and clip type. A 2 (gender: male, female) \times 2 (clip type:

Table I. Sexual Arousal Ratings by Film Type and Gender

Sexual arousal ratings	Film type		
	Female-selected <i>M (SD)</i>	Male-selected <i>M (SD)</i>	Combined <i>M (SD)</i>
Women (<i>N</i> = 17)	4.4 (2.4)	3.9 (2.3)	4.1 (2.4)
Men (<i>N</i> = 15)	5.6 (2.4)	6.6 (2.4)	6.1 (2.4)

male, female) mixed between- and within-subjects ANOVA on the sexual arousal ratings revealed a significant main effect of Gender, $F(1, 30) = 10.84$, $p < .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$. Overall, men rated the film clips as significantly more arousing than did the women. In addition, there was a significant Gender \times Clip Type interaction, $F(1, 30) = 32.53$, $p < .0001$; Huhn-Feldt corrected. Post hoc contrast analyses revealed that in response to the *female*-selected clips, men and women's reports of sexual arousal did not differ significantly, $F(1, 30) = 3.89$, *ns*; however, their arousal ratings for the *male*-selected clips were significantly different, $F(1, 30) = 19.06$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$. Furthermore, men and women experienced higher levels of sexual arousal to clips selected by individuals of their own gender; men reported significantly higher levels of arousal to the male-selected films, $F(1, 14) = 32.99$, $p < .0001$, and women to the female-selected clips, $F(1, 16) = 7.10$, $p < .02$.

As the male- and female-selected clips had been randomly assigned a "clip" number, any analysis with Clip Number would be meaningless. However, separate *t* tests were run for the male- and female-selected clips to explore further gender differences in sexual arousal ratings. These analyses revealed that whereas men and women differed in their responses to only two female-selected clips (F8 and F10, see Fig. 1), significant gender differences were found for 9 of the 10 male-selected clips. Using Holm's sequential Bonferroni procedure (Seaman, Levin, & Serlin, 1991), none of the differences on the female-selected clips, but six of the nine comparisons for the male-selected clips, remained significant.

To explore differences between ratings for clips that had been selected by the research assistants and those that had been recommended by other researchers, a 2 (gender: male, female) \times 2 (clip source: researcher, student) \times 2 (clip type: male, female) mixed between- and

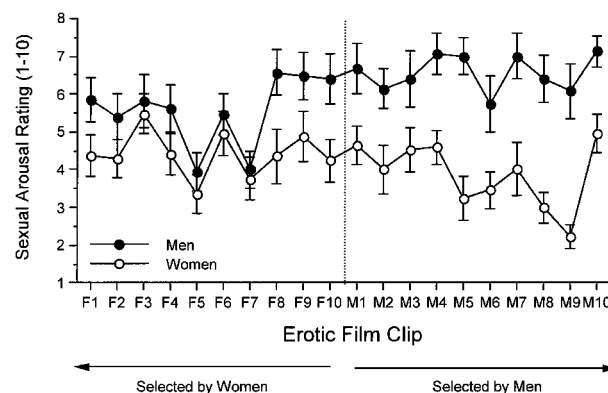


Fig. 1. Sexual arousal to male- and female-selected erotic film clips in men (*N* = 15) and women (*N* = 17).

within-subjects ANOVA was conducted. This revealed a significant interaction of Gender \times Clip Source, $F(1, 30) = 11.68, p < .002$, and Clip Source \times Clip Type, $F(1, 30) = 11.69, p < .002$. Post hoc analyses revealed that men’s arousal ratings were higher for research assistant-selected clips ($M = 6.38, SD = 1.90$) than for clips that had been selected by other researchers ($M = 5.37, SD = 2.26$), $F(1, 14) = 36.78, p < .0001$; no differences were found for women. Follow-up tests on the interaction between Clip Source and Clip Type revealed that the *female* clips recommended by other researchers generated lower arousal ratings for both men and women ($M = 4.23, SD = 1.58$) than the ones selected by the female research-assistants ($M = 5.28, SD = 1.99$), $F(1, 31) = 15.60, p < .0004$. No differences for the male clips and no other interaction effects were found.

Predictors of Clip Ratings

Table II presents the correlations between the degree of self-reported sexual arousal and (1) the participants’ ratings of a number of clip characteristics and (2) how they viewed the film clips. The correlation between the “participant” and “observer” items was .23 in men ($p < .001$) and $-.18$ in women ($p < .002$). Imagining being a participant while watching the clips was strongly related to how much one identified with the same-sex actor (men: $r = .88, p < .001$; women: $r = .80, p < .001$) and the attractiveness of the opposite-sex actor (men: $r = .62, p < .001$; women: $r = .40, p < .001$; these were the highest intercorrelations for this item). For both men and women, watching as an “observer” was most strongly related to how much attention the participants paid to the *female* actor (men: $r = .57, p < .001$; women: $r = .40, p < .001$).

Table II. Correlations Between Sexual Arousal and Other Ratings

	Women (N = 17)	Men (N = 15)
Imagined being a participant	.75	.71
Watched as an observer	.04*	.58
Identified with actor of own gender	.64	.68
Attractiveness of male actor	.46	.34
Attractiveness of female actor	.44	.77
Attention paid to male actor	.27	.40
Attention paid to female actor	.19	.83
Liked the clip setting	.42	.51
Liked the soundtrack	.37	.44
Interested	.48	.65
Repulsed	$-.40$	$-.25$

*All correlations except this one were $p < .001$.

Cluster Regression Analyses

Instead of using an average or single score for each participant as our dependent variable, as is done in multiple regression analysis, cluster regression procedures (Huber, 1967; Rogers, 1993) were used to allow the inclusion of all 20 arousal ratings and with these a number of associated variables characterizing each of the 20 film clips (e.g., attractiveness of the actors, soundtrack, etc.). Cluster regression is a form of multilevel or hierarchical analysis that takes into account that observations are not independent for a given individual. This approach was chosen because we were less interested in predicting a participant’s average response to film clips than in examining how our predictor variables would be related to variability in arousal ratings. Because a number of the predictor variables were interrelated, regression analyses were run in several steps. All 20 arousal ratings were used in every analysis, but at each step a different set of predictor variables was added.

First, an analysis was run with those variables that most clearly reflected the content or characteristics of the film clips: attractiveness of the male and female actors, and quality of the setting and soundtrack. For the male participants, 62% of the variance was accounted for, with only the attractiveness of the female actor reaching statistical significance ($\beta = .78; p < .001$). The regression equation for the female participants accounted for 32% of the variance, with attractiveness of both the male ($\beta = .20; p < .001$) and female ($\beta = .21; p < .003$) actors being positively related to sexual arousal ratings.

Next, the two items reflecting aspects of the participants’ affective responses to the film clips (the experience of repulsion and interest) were added in a second analysis. For males, the explained variance increased to 69% and both the attractiveness of the female actor ($\beta = .67; p < .001$) and feelings of interest ($\beta = .35; p < .004$) were positively related to the sexual arousal ratings. For women, the repulsion, but not the interest item, was (negatively) related to sexual arousal ($\beta = $-.21; p < .02$$), and this reduced the effect of the female actors’ attractiveness ($\beta = .13; ns$). The attractiveness of the male actor remained a significant variable ($\beta = .11; p < .01; R^2 = 39\%$).

Finally, the participant and observer items were added. The explained variance further increased to 77% for the male participants. In addition to the attractiveness of the female actor ($\beta = .45; p < .001$) and feeling interested ($\beta = .21; p < .007$), imagining oneself as a participant ($\beta = .25; p < .02$) and watching as an observer ($\beta = .22; p < .006$) both contributed to the regression equation. For women, the explained variance increased substantially, to

65%, even though only one predictor variable was significant: imagining oneself as a participant ($\beta = .54$; $p < .001$).

These last analyses were repeated, but this time separately for the male- and female-selected clips. Although the general pattern of results remained the same, some differences were found. For the female-selected clips, sexual arousal ratings in men were now also related to the attractiveness of the *male* actor, although negatively ($\beta = -.21$; $p < .03$; $R^2 = 77\%$). For women, “feeling interested” was an additional predictor of sexual arousal ratings ($\beta = -.21$; $p < .05$; $R^2 = 62\%$). The same predictors of male arousal to all 20 clips (reported above), emerged as predictors of just the 10 male-selected clips.

Individual Variability

To evaluate whether gender differences existed in the variability of arousal ratings, standard deviations were computed for each individual’s ratings for the male- and female-selected clips. Although most participants’ responses had a range of at least 5 and included at least one rating greater than 5, one female participant gave all 20 clips a rating of either 1 or 2 (resulting in an outlying *SD*). Excluding this one outlier, a 2 (gender: male, female) \times 2 (clip type: male, female) mixed between- and within-subjects ANOVA was run on the standard deviations. Both the main effect of Gender (men: $M = 1.5$; women: $M = 2.0$; $F(1, 29) = 8.4$, $p < .007$) and Clip Type (male-selected clips: $M = 1.6$; female-selected clips: $M = 1.9$; $F(1, 29) = 8.4$, $p < .008$) were significant. Although women generally varied more in their arousal ratings than men, both men and women showed more variability in their ratings of female- than male-selected film clips.

Although, on average, men responded more strongly to the 20 clips, approximately one-third of the women (35%) responded more strongly on average to all clips than one third of the men (33%). Also, although women generally gave higher arousal ratings to female-selected clips, four women (24%) experienced higher levels of arousal in response to male-selected than to female-selected films. This was in contrast to the men who, without exception, gave the highest mean ratings to the male-selected clips.

DISCUSSION

The main goal of this study was to examine gender differences in sexual responsiveness to erotic films that had been selected for their differential appeal for men and women. Women found the female-selected clips

significantly more arousing than the male-selected clips. The male participants, while generally reporting higher levels of arousal to the erotic clips than the women, reported the highest levels of sexual arousal in response to the male-selected clips. This suggests that both men and women agreed more with members of their own gender on what are more or less sexually explicit arousing films. This is an interesting finding, considering that the clips were standardized for the activities depicted, the amount of time devoted to foreplay, oral stimulation and intercourse, and the number and gender of actors participating in each of those activities. The only significant difference between men and women was found for ratings of male-selected film clips; women reported less arousal than men to these clips. However, there were notable exceptions to the above findings, with men and women responding with relatively high levels of sexual arousal to some of the clips selected by previewers of the other gender (e.g., for women, the second highest arousal rating was for a clip that was selected by men).

Despite our efforts to include film clips that would be arousing to a female audience, women did not report arousal levels comparable to those of the men. Whether this means that women tend to respond less to visual erotic stimuli than men or that other (e.g., social) factors prevent women from feeling or reporting higher levels of sexual arousal remains to be determined. Alternatively, the film selection criteria, which required that all clips depict heterosexual sexual interactions between one man and one woman, may have influenced the responses in women. However, the same constraints applied to the male clips; had we used a more liberal selection procedure, the male assistants might also have located clips that would have induced higher levels of sexual arousal in men. Koukounas and McCabe (1997) found that men showed a preference for scenarios portraying “three-somes,” whereas women preferred depictions of vaginal intercourse between a man and a woman.

Genital response measures were not included in this study because current psychophysiological instrumentation does not allow comparison of absolute response levels in men and women (Janssen, 2002). It is conceivable, however, that women and men responded with equally strong genital responses to the male film clips. Consistent with this possibility is the finding by Laan et al. (1994) that although women reported significantly more sexual arousal during the presentation of a woman-made, female-centered erotic film compared with a man-made, male-centered film clip, their genital responses to the two films did not differ.

Correlations between sexual arousal and ratings of clip characteristics (including how the participants

processed the clips) tended to be higher in men than in women. This may be a consequence of our clip rating measure, which was somewhat limited in scope. Variables relating to the narrative structure (storyline) or the interaction between the actors might be important in predicting sexual arousal (perhaps more so for women than for men). These variables were not included in this study. Nevertheless, even with our limited predictor variables, the regression analyses explained comparable amounts of variance in the ratings by men and women. For men, most of the variance was explained in the first of the cluster analyses, with the attractiveness of the female actor emerging as the most important predictor; the additive value of entering more predictors in the analyses for men was minimal. For women, the explained variance increased dramatically after a larger number of variables were included.

In men, both “watching as an observer” and “imagining yourself as a participant” predicted sexual arousal to the film clips, whereas in women only the latter variable was related. Apparently, for men “watching as an observer” and “imagining yourself as a participant” are not conflicting or incompatible ways of processing a sexual stimulus. Related to this intriguing finding, for both men and women, watching as an observer was strongly related to how much attention was paid to the *female* actor. This suggests that the amount of attention heterosexual men allocate to the female actor contributes to their sexual response independently from the degree to which they feel “pulled” into a sexual situation in which a female actor is depicted.

In the fields of cultural and postmodern studies, there is a literature on gender differences in viewing and responding to erotica (e.g., DeLaurentis, 1987; Mulvey, 1975; Stacey, 1992); however, few empirical studies have explored possible gender differences in the processing of sexual stimuli. An early hypothesis was put forward by Money and Ehrhardt (1972), who made a distinction between “identification” and “objectification,” and speculated that the former would be more relevant to women and the latter to men. According to these authors, when a man watches a woman engaged in sexual behavior, he will see her as a sexual object and, in imagery, “takes her out of the picture and has a sexual relationship” (p. 262). A woman, in contrast, would be more likely to identify with the female actor, such that “she herself becomes the sexual object” (p. 262). To date, only one study has provided data relevant to this hypothesis, and this study did not support the idea that women identify with the female actor (Schmidt, 1975). The findings from the present study, involving a more direct test of Money and Ehrhardt’s distinction, suggest that whereas women may indeed be more likely to identify with female actors, men seem equally

likely to “objectify” and “identify” when presented with visual sexual stimuli.

This study revealed some interesting gender differences in the predictors of self-reported sexual arousal to erotic film clips. However, it should be emphasized that our understanding of how sexual arousal is activated in response to sexual stimuli remains cursory. We should be cautious in inferring any causal relationships between the predictor and outcome variables explored in this study. While it is possible that the experience of sexual arousal may indeed depend on the degree to which a viewer feels immersed in a film clip, it is also conceivable that imagining oneself as a participant in a depicted scene occurs as a result of feeling sexually aroused. Also, it is tempting to conclude on the basis of our findings that imagining oneself as a participant is synonymous with sexual arousal; however, this would imply that feeling immersed in a scene is associated with a specific emotional state. This is unlikely; one can feel equally immersed in an erotic film or in a thriller, while experiencing different emotions.

The question of whether the experience of feeling immersed is the result of being in a certain emotional state, or whether they are both the outcome of some other underlying process, is intriguing. Cognitive, emotion, and psychophysiological studies, as well as the models of sexual arousal based on them, have pointed to the crucial role of attention in the activation and modulation of sexual arousal (Barlow, 1986; Dekker & Everaerd, 1988; Geer & Fuhr, 1976; Janssen, Everaerd, Spiering, & Janssen, 2000; Laan & Everaerd, 1995b). Dekker and Everaerd (1988) found that both men and women reported stronger arousal during sexual imagery when they paid particular attention to sexual stimuli, sensations, and physiological responses one might experience in the imagined situation. Others have shown that distraction, or the allocation of attention *away* from the sexual content of a stimulus, whether it is externally (e.g., Geer & Fuhr, 1976) or internally (Barlow, 1986) generated, is detrimental to sexual arousal. However, the factors that determine and control attentional focus have only begun to be explored (Janssen et al., 2000).

What can we learn from this study about how to best select film clips for sex research? Our findings suggest that the preferred approach depends on whether one wants to maximize individual responses or induce comparable levels of subjective sexual arousal in men and women. Presenting women with film clips initially selected by men will likely lead to lower levels of sexual arousal, compared with female-selected films, and larger gender differences in arousal. Therefore, to maximize responses in women, film clips are probably best selected by women. The recommendation to let same-gender individuals select film

clips to induce the strongest possible responses seems even more relevant to men, as they responded much stronger to male- than female-selected clips. However, if the goal is to induce comparable levels of arousal in men and women, it seems most appropriate to have women select the films clips for all participants (although men may report lower levels of arousal than if they watched male-selected films).

Another finding was that researcher-selected film clips, particularly those used by other researchers in studies involving women, were associated with lower arousal ratings than clips selected by research assistants. The reason for this difference is unknown, but could be related to a number of factors, including the fact that research assistants and participants had similar demographic backgrounds, and that the research assistants' clips were selected from a large set of films, obtained from a wide variety of sources. Nonetheless, this finding further supports the relevance of studying, and reporting on, the process by which sexual stimuli are selected for research studies.

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